

# Brook Farm

## A 19th-Century Social Experiment

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**B**rook Farm, one of the many utopian communities which came into being in the mid-19th century in the United States, began in 1841 with high hopes. After six short years, it shut down, with disappointment and in debt. It was a response to certain events of the 1830s, which had left not only laboring classes but intellectual cliques disenchanted with the prevailing state of affairs, in society generally, and in one branch of Protestantism.

The unexpected financial Panic of 1837 had a devastating economic effect on the country, first on the urban laboring poor and then sweeping on to engulf professional and salaried workers. Thousands were thrown out of work and onto city streets, banks folded, and property had to be sold at ruinous prices. In addition to the economic debacle, intellectual challenges had arisen in American Protestantism fermenting since the 1820s, and surfacing gradually in Massachusetts pulpits. In 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to become the “Sage of Concord,” had delivered his famous and controversial Divinity School Address at Harvard, in which he questioned certain fundamental Christian teachings, especially those centering on the scriptural stories of miracles. Emerson’s questions were echoed by other ministers in the area, among them George Ripley and Theodore Parker, each of whom would become involved with the Brook Farm endeavor.

In 2001, as we begin the third millennium, we like to take satisfaction in having “think tanks,” and “brain banks,” to address current crises and issues. In Boston in the 1830s, there existed a precursor of our idea incubators. A symposium which evolved into the Transcendentalist Club, originally formed to follow up on Emersonian questions about Unitarianism, extended its discussions from religious topics (Revelation, Inspiration, Providence, Truth) to societal ones (Community Living, Education,

Nature, Beauty). By 1841, the Transcendentalists met regularly at the new bookstore, already gaining fame, of Elizabeth Peabody, on West Street in downtown Boston (adjacent to today’s Brattle Book Store). It is there where the formidable Margaret Fuller held her Wednesday evening “Conversations”; it is there where the future of *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist magazine, was planned; and it is there where George Ripley and his wife Sophia met and talked with the other communal optimists who would soon join them in the countryside.

The Ripleys had summered contentedly for several years at the Ellis dairy farm, in Roxbury (later West Roxbury), eight miles southwest of Boston over rough roads. They and 18 other hopefuls went there in the spring of 1841, after Ripley had finally resigned his pulpit. This small group wrote up an unincorporated stock company, listing 16 Articles of Agreement and Association, outlining their idealistic purposes and policies, and created The Brook Farm Institute for Agriculture and Education. They spent the next six months getting ready; in October they passed papers on the Ellis farm and a smaller parcel across the road (now Baker Street), and ended up with about 200 acres of land.

Initially, the only buildings were a large barn and the Ellis farmhouse, which became the center of their enterprise, and which they called “The Hive” because of its constant busy activity. It had rooms for a family of boarders, the kitchen, living room, dining room (later enlarged); wings were added for a laundry room and a room where children could be left with supervision while their mothers worked on the farm or keeping house—a forerunner of today’s “day care center.” The upstairs floor evolved into “Attica,” a dormitory for young men.

The Institute next rented the old (1740) house across the road (called “The Nest”) and turned it over to Miss Marianne Ripley, George’s

sister, as the school's primary teacher. She and others lived there, but went across the street for community activities. The next year, the Institute built a large wooden building on the highest point of land, which became their community center. Ripley and his wife moved into it, bringing his large library. They called this "The Eyrie" (from aerie, a human dwelling on a height).

They also built a cottage, later named for Margaret Fuller (she never stayed there), in the form of a Maltese cross, with rooms to house boarders. Some of the rooms were later used as schoolrooms for the younger children. Then, in 1843, Ichabod Morton of Plymouth built the Pilgrim House. He soon returned to Plymouth and Pilgrim House became available for Brook Farm activities. The last two structures erected

were The Greenhouse and The Factory Building.

This, then, was the new community: a combination of farming and schooling ventures. The farming component was in truth a failure: poor soil to start with, but also because of its communalist approach of treating all work-

ers equally, no matter how long they toiled or what tasks they performed. It did, however, provide most of the food the community needed. In contrast, the school component was a success with three levels, in various buildings: a nursery school for the youngest children, a primary division for those up to 10 years old, and an advanced section for those heading for college (six years planned) or farming (three years).

We would call the curriculum "progressive"; teachers and pupils engaged in much open discussion and debate, hours were flexible, adjusting to farming needs, and its informal discipline was a far cry from the rigid standards of most of the schools of that day. As the farming activities faltered, the school endeavors flour-

ished; and only the shock and fears arising from a smallpox epidemic in 1845 forced it to shut down permanently.

Social life, and socializing generally, however, was a thriving and delightful continuing experience at Brook Farm from the beginning. The peace and tranquillity which had first attracted the Ripleys also lured a steady stream of Boston's authors and literati to Brook Farm. As many as 4,000 visited the community in one year which, at its peak, had probably 200 members. The memoirs which survive demonstrate how the intellectual stimulation and discussion at Brook Farm stayed with the participants for the rest of their lives.

The summer of 1843, however, marked a major change in the direction of the Brook Farm experiment. Ripley and other Transcendentalists

had for some time been taken with the writings and ideas of the late Charles Fourier, a French socialist reformer. His theories were promoted vigorously in America by Albert Brisbane, a frequent visitor, with his friend Horace Greeley, to Brook Farm. Fourier's main proposal was that society be orga-

nized in "phalanxes" which would incorporate all necessary work and education into clusters dealing with all aspects of a community, and do it in a more efficient way. By January, 1844, the Transcendentalists began printing *The Harbinger*, espousing Fourier's formulations. Brook Farm had been converted.

In spite of often vigorous unfavorable reaction to Fourierism (one critic compared it to a "... creature of corruption, which first began to crawl, lizard like, in the filthiest dregs of Parisian society ... [and] offers to encircle in its scaly, glistening folds all ... business, industry, and education"\*), the Brook Farm Association pushed ahead. In the spring of 1845, it began to build The Phalanstery, a massive, three-story structure

An 1844 oil painting of Brook Farm by Josiah Wolcott. Photo courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.



just below The Hive, with 100 rooms planned as the new nucleus of the Brook Farm phalanx. But tragically, in March 1846, as the finishing touches were being put on this 175-foot edifice—indeed as a celebratory dance was being held at The Hive—the Phalanstery burned to the ground, possibly because of a faulty fireplace which had been installed to dry out its wood faster.

This disaster, together with growing criticism of the switch to Fourierism and the earlier closing of the school, was the final blow to the Brook Farm Association: it had gone into debt to build the Phalanstery; it could not survive. In August 1847, its stockholders authorized three trustees to dispose of Brook Farm. The dream had ended.

The later history of Brook Farm's lands and buildings can be summarized briefly into "site uses." The City of Boston (of which West Roxbury was not yet a part) first bought it at auction in 1849 to use as an almshouse. In 1855, Reverend James Freeman Clarke, one of The Harbinger's contributors, bought it and in 1861 lent it to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; the Second Massachusetts Regiment trained there before going south to fight in the Civil War. Mr. and Mrs. John Munroe bought it in 1868 to set up a summer boarding house; and in 1870, Mr. Gottlieb Burkhardt bought it, deeding it over to The Association of the Evangelical Lutheran Church For Works of Mercy. By 1872, the Martin Luther Orphan's Home was in place; this lasted until 1943. Over the next three decades, the Hive, which had survived more than one fire, found use first as a foster home and later as a residential children's treatment center. In 1966, the Secretary of the Interior designated the site of Brook Farm as a National Historic Landmark. Moreover, in 1977, Brook Farm was declared a landmark by the City of Boston Landmarks Commission, and in 1988, under Governor Dukakis, the state's Metropolitan District Commission (M.D.C.) finally acquired Brook Farm.

Recently, in the 1990s, the M.D.C., assisted by various volunteer groups, some affiliated with the West Roxbury Historical Association, have done excavation work, archeological digs, and trail clearing, identifying old

building foundations. Even the Margaret Fuller Cottage fell victim to a vandal fire in 1984. In 2000, as part of the City of Boston's new Millennium Park, built on the site of the old Gardner Street landfill, a bridge was included, spanning Sawmill Brook and connecting with Brook Farm.

The old Brook Farm site, readily identified with M.D.C. markers, has reverted as much as possible to its original appearance. Today, the only building left standing is the Print Shop, once the Lutheran publishing center. Efforts are continuing to raise restoration funds for this last remnant. To be sure, there is a contemporary caretaker's cottage for the abutting cemetery; a plaque commemorating the Civil War soldiers' encampment; and some of the pristine views of 160 years ago are altered by a new high school and its athletic fields. The 100-acre Millennium Park offers magnificent views of the surrounding countryside, and two large industrial tracts and three small houses have settled in nearby. Nonetheless, a visitor can imagine without too much effort what those Transcendentalists might have envisioned as they sought to establish their rural American Utopia.

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#### Note

- \* Quoted in Zoltan Haraszti, *The Idyll of Brook Farm* (Boston: The Trustees of the Public Library, 1937), 29.

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